

## Guild Records in Sweden

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Sweden has some of the best records in the world for doing genealogy. Most of the time you will use Swedish church records, but if your ancestor was a craftsman then you might find even more about them in the guild records of Sweden. In this presentation I will:

- Explain what a guild is
- Introduce you to the roles of guild members
- Explain how the guilds functioned
- Talk about the records they kept
- Show you how to access the records

### WHAT'S A GUILD (*SKRÅ*)?

A guild (*skrå* or *skrååmbete*) is a society of craftsmen who oversee a craft. Guilds originated in Northern Italy in the 1000s and spread across Europe in the 1100s. Guilds in Sweden began in the mid-1300s with widespread practice by the 1400s. Guilds could control their craft and economy by limiting competition, deciding who would be the headmaster, and maintaining quality control within the profession. Kingdom wide guild ordinances were passed in 1669<sup>1</sup> and again in 1720<sup>2</sup>. In 1846, the guild system was abolished and replaced by city societies.<sup>3</sup> These societies continued to have the same master, apprentice, and student laborer structure. Further they required that a person be of legal age, confirmed, and a master craftsman to open a workshop. The 1846 ordinance<sup>4</sup> included the same opportunity for unmarried or married women.<sup>5</sup>

The members of a guild were:

**Headmaster (*Ålderman*):** The headmaster made decisions on conflicts and other business matters. He was a master, recommended by two other masters and chosen by the mayor (*borgmästare*). The headmaster was accountable to the mayor and city council. The

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<sup>1</sup> 1699 Guild Ordinance (1699 *Kongl. Majst. Allgemene Ordning och Skråå för Handtwärkarne i Sverige*).

<sup>2</sup> 1720 Guild Ordinance (1720. *Kongl. Majts. Förnyade algemene ordning och skrå för handwärckarne i Sverige och Finland*). The 1720 ordinance only had minor adjustments from the 1699 ordinance.

<sup>3</sup> Swedish Wikipedia, <https://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skråväsen>

<sup>4</sup> Handels- Handtwerks- och Fabriksordningen 1846

<sup>5</sup> In practice, unmarried and married women could seek and join a profession before 1846. The 1846 ordinance legally stated the opportunity. Unmarried women had to be at least 25 years old, have agreement from their legal guardian, and proved their master skill.

headmaster served for two years unless the term was shortened due to abuse, resignation, or other reasons.

**Assessor** (*Bissittare*): The assessor served as an assistant to the headmaster.

**Master** (*Mästare*): The master had to prove that he had honestly learned his craft and give testimony of his work. The mayor, city council, and peers had to trust that he was capable and competent. Previous work as an apprentice (*gesäll*) was required, along with an example of his craft (*mästareprov*) which was done completely on his own to prove his skills.<sup>6</sup> After receiving approval of a master project, the applying master went with the headmaster and assessor to the city hall to take the oath of a burgher. He also paid a fee that was donated to the guild fund. The master would hire apprentices, and student pupils (*läro-pojke*, or *läro-dräng*) as employees at his workshop (*verkstad*). Masters provided lodging, clothes, and food for their apprentices and student laborers. If a master overextended and could not provide for their employees, the mayor and city council would intervene to dictate the number of employees the master could have.

**Apprentice** (*Gesäll*): The apprentice working under a master where there was no guild or assembly was not denied opportunity for employment. Instead, the mayor, city council, headmaster, and assessor would examine the work and acknowledge the skills. All foreign- or native-born apprentices, traveling by own cost and seeking work had to apply through the headmaster who would communicate with the masters. If there were no openings, then the apprentice would receive financial assistance (*tårepénning*) until he was established at a workshop. If work had been prevented by a master, then the master would be fined. The minimum amount of time to contract with a master was 6 months. Apprentices hired at the cost of a master, lived with the master's household, and had a right to store his chest and cloak bag in the same room where he lived. If a contracted apprentice left before 6 months, then the apprentice was be fined 6 months wages. Apprentices could not:

- Refuse a work request from their master or had to pay fines.
- Hold an assembly without 2 masters being present.
- Seek lodging at another household without permission or knowledge of the master.
- Entice student laborers to a pub or social gathering or faced fines.

Apprentices who wanted to travel and work in other cities had to obtain a *respass* from the guild and pay a fee. If wanting to travel to other countries, the fee was doubled.

**Older Student Laborer** (*Lärodräng*): The older student laborer had to be over 19 years old. After completion, an older student laborer could stay in the city where he trained as an independent worker. When a younger student laborer graduated and became an older student laborer, he was released from the register, began to pay the quarterly fee, contributed to the apprentice fund, and paid for his work contract and certificate of completion. He also contributed to the poor fund and was responsible for the cost of his meals.

**Younger Student Laborer** (*Läropojke*) The younger student laborer was between 14 and 19 years old. To be accepted as a younger student laborer required approval by his parents/guardian in agreement with the master. They would agree to the number of work hours, and he was obligated to work on business, not personal projects of the master or apprentices.

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<sup>6</sup> If a master or apprentice stated that they helped with a *mästarprov* then the master was demoted to a *gesäll* for 1 year. A *gesäll* would be demoted to a *lärodräng* for 1 year.

The duration was for 5 years<sup>7</sup>, and lodging and expenses were paid by the master. If a master died before the time of completion, the younger student laborer could stay on and work for the widow and *mästarsven*. Before the reformation, the opportunity to join a guild required being born to parents who were married. Although there was no legal requirement in the 1720 guild ordinance, many letters of recommendation (*bördsbrev*) state the honorable standing, and names of the parents.

Student laborers were legally protected from assault or abuse from the master or apprentices. Masters could not fire or dismiss a student laborer without cause. To dismiss a student laborer required involvement from the police, a representative from the magistrate, the headmaster and assessor. Apprentices that sought unwilling discharge before time of completion, had to pay for damages for any harm cause to the master's business. If someone tried to remove an apprentice or student laborer away without the master's knowledge before the agreed time of completion, they faced fines.

If a student laborer stole an item of lesser value from his master, the 1<sup>st</sup> offence was taken to the mayor, and city council, after the headmaster and assessor's punishments. Second offence, or a theft of larger amount was referred to the local *häradsrätt* according to law.

## HOW DID THE GUILD FUNCTION?

Knowledge of a craft was passed from masters to pupils. A youth student laborer could become an adult student laborer, who in turn could become an apprentice. An apprentice could seek to study under 1 or more masters over time and then apply to become a master. Masters had their own workshop and would hire apprentices and student laborers. Masters were sworn in as a burgher and were accountable to the mayor and city council. If a master belonging to a guild died, the widow had the right to keep and manage the workshop. Often the widow would re-marry to another master from the same guild.

According to the 1720 guild ordinance, if 3 masters of the same craft lived in the same city a guild should be formed immediately. A headmaster would be recommended by 2 masters and chosen by the mayor. Once a guild was formed, they would meet to discuss business, pay quarterly fees, and handle other matters. There had to be at least 3 masters present to meet. The guild members could meet at anybody's house, and a meeting was called an assembly (*sammankomst*). Assemblies were held, maximum 4 times a year. An assembly could not be held without a member from the magistrate, the headmaster, and assessor's knowledge. A sworn notary public had to be present to keep minutes of the meeting. The minutes could be requested by the national treasury office for review. The guild had a chest with 2 or 3 unique locks. The headmaster and assessors kept the keys, so their presence was required to open the chest. Money collected from fees<sup>8</sup> and fines, the guild seal, the guild ordinance<sup>9</sup>, and other papers were stored in the chest. The chest was typically stored at the headmaster's home.

If 1 or 2 masters of the same craft lived in an outlying area, they were encouraged to join the guild in the neighboring city. If there was not a matching guild for a craft in a neighboring city, then the master was expected to join the guild in Stockholm regardless of their place of residence. Masters in rural areas were not obligated to attend assemblies and would send their quarterly membership fee to the meeting. Masters were not legally obligated to belong to a

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<sup>7</sup> The sons of a headmaster or assessor were obligated to 3 years instead of 5 years. Time of obligation or advancement could be reduced for advanced or quick learners.

<sup>8</sup> One quarter of the fees went to a poor fund which supported poor or struggling widows and children of guild members. An annual audit of all fees was conducted by the headmaster, assessor, and in presence of the mayor and representatives of the city council.

<sup>9</sup> An ordinance specifically for the craft of the guild. The ordinance was read at least 1 time a year at assembly.

guild. An independent master (*frimästare*) could take on apprentices or student laborers with, or without a bondsman (*löftesman*),<sup>10</sup> but it created suspicion and potential mistrust with a guild. Masters from other countries or cities wanting to join a guild had to have a certificate from the magistrate stating their honesty and qualifications and then paid the fees.

## RURAL CRAFTSMEN

Craftsmen who lived 12 or more miles from a city, or who were hired by a parish to be e.g., parish shoemaker, general blacksmith, tanner, or tailor did not belong to a guild. They may have been taught a craft by their parents or employers, or by starting in a guild and later leaving to work independently.

## RECORDS

- There is a variety of records that were kept by a guild. The most common ones are:
- *Bördsbrev*: a letter or certificate of recommendation.
- *In och utskrivningsböcker*: a record of people registered to or removed from the guild.
- *Mästerstycken*: a document describing the master-project of an apprentice.
- Correspondence with members in rural areas.
- Accounts of fines and fees.

When the guild system was abolished in 1846, there were no guidelines to what should be done with the guild chest and the records they stored. This led to inconsistent record preservation. In some cases, the headmaster assumed ownership and he, or his descendants decided what to do with it. Others gave it to the craft societies formed after 1846 which kept the traditions. Most chests eventually made it to museums, archives, and libraries all over the country. Although a guild chest was preserved, you cannot expect that the associated guild records survived. A large amount of guild archives ended up at the Nordiska Museet in Stockholm which gathered cultural material from all over the country in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The Stockholm City Archive also has a very large collection. Other archives are found in the regional branch of Riksarkivet, county museums (Länsmuseet), city archives or museums, and even university libraries in Uppsala and Lund.

## ACCESS TO RECORDS

There are a variety of places to search for guild records. Many have been digitized and are available online. Others were never microfilmed or digitized.

- **FamilySearch:** Has a large collection of guild records from many cities. The largest collections are from Stockholm, Malmö, Norrköping, Göteborg, Linköping, and Hälsingborg. They are found by doing a *Place* search in the FamilySearch Catalog.<sup>11</sup> Search by the name of the city and county e.g., Sweden, Stockholm, Stockholm and then look for the topic *Occupations*.
- **ArkivDigital:** Open ArkivDigital<sup>12</sup> (subscription required, free at FamilySearch Family History Centers). Click on *Archive search*, and then on *Archive type* to see the dropdown

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<sup>10</sup> A löftesman (or borgen) was a person who would answer for, or certify the agreement between a youth student laborer, adult student laborer, or apprentice to be employed by a master.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.arkivdigital.net/>

list. Choose *Guild archives* from the list. Most of their guild records are from Malmö. They have three collections from Göteborg and one from Lund as of June 2022.

- **Riksarkivet and Stockholm City Archive:** Go to the online catalog of the National Archives of Sweden (Riksarkivet) called Nationell Arkivdatabas (NAD).<sup>13</sup> Type *Skråväsen* in the *Sök arkiv* field for records all over the country. For Stockholm City look for the title and click on *SKRÅARKIV*. Once you find a specific guild, click on the name and volumes to see what exists. Riksarkivet has not correlated digitized guild record collections on FamilySearch with NAD. If it's not available on FamilySearch you will need to contact the archive to do a look up.

## TIPS FOR GENEALOGISTS

1. A *bördsbrev* might provide a date of birth, birthplace, and names of parents. This is especially useful when the church records are lacking.
2. The *bördsbrev* should mention a place of origin or length of service which helps to determine places of residence.
3. The widow of a master was likely to re-marry another master from the same guild.
4. The guild system from medieval times was revised in 1669, and again in 1720. It was abolished in 1846 and replaced by city societies.
5. If there was no guild for a specific craft, and the craftsman wanted to join a guild, they would see if there was a guild in a neighboring city. If there wasn't, they could join a guild in Stockholm. This means, the guild records in Stockholm include craftsmen from all over the country.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://sok.riksarkivet.se/nad>